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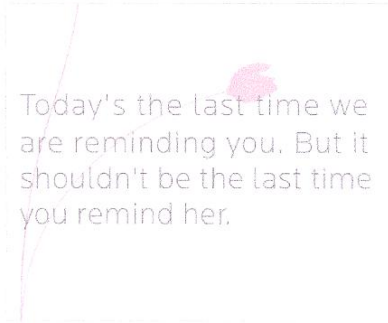
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Indian Women

Lifestyle changes alter breast cancer patient profile

Malathy Iyer, TNN Oct 19, 2011, 03:12AM IST

Tags: Lifestyle disease | Indian Cancer Society

MUMBAI: Breast cancer, the urban malaise, is spreading fast not just in terms of numbers but it's percolating to the poorer sections even as it breaks the age barrier to affect younger Indian women in larger-than-ever numbers.

If 3,800 women walk into hospitals with breast cancer now as against 1,500 women annually until five years back, doctors say the main reason is lifestyle. "In the last 20 years, women have their first child later, they don't breast-feed children long enough and are overweight as compared to their mothers. The results are showing now," said Tata Memorial Centre's director Dr Rajan Badwe. Breast cancer, which has a genetic component as well, is now mainly a lifestyle disease, said experts.

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Moreover, a study published in the Lancet last month showed younger women were dying in larger numbers in developing countries. India was not an exception to this rule, said the study of 187 nations done by the Washington University's Institute of Health Metrics And Evaluation.

Dr Sanjay Sharma from the Breast Cancer Foundation said while the age profile of a breast cancer patient from the West would be between 55 to 70 years, the Indian woman patient could be in the 40-55 age group. "It is true that Indian women are getting the disease a decade earlier than their western counterparts," he added. However, Dr Badwe offers a statistical correction. India is a young nation with more younger than old people. "So even if 50% of patients are from a younger age group, we need to remember that they belong to 85% of the population, whereas the 50% older patients hail from the 15% bracket, or the ageing population," Dr Badwe said.

Another study, published in August in the British Journal of Cancer by the Indian Cancer Society, showed that college-educated Mumbai women had a 90% increased risk for being overweight, compared to illiterate women. The same study showed that in the last 30 years the rates of breast cancer among women aged 30-64 had risen significantly.

There is another nuanced change as well. The Breast Cancer Foundation of India recently carried out a sample survey of 1,000 women in Mumbai and found a worrisome socio-economic trend. It's not just career women who don't breast feed their babies for more than two months because they have to get back on duty, nannies working for them are doing the same. Dr Sharma said 60% of women interviewed for the survey didn't breast-feed for more than two months. "Nannies appointed by urban working women are mimicking their